



**Remarks by the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs**  
**Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu**  
**at the Vienna Conference on “Protecting Civilians in Urban Warfare”**  
**High-Level Opening Segment**



Vienna  
1<sup>st</sup> October 2019

His Excellency, Mr. Alexander Schallenberg,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to be able to participate, on behalf of Secretary-General António Guterres, in the opening segment of the Vienna Conference on Protecting Civilians in Urban Warfare. We commend the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Austria for its vision and leadership.

This conference addresses the core of the Secretary-General's Agenda for Disarmament and his call for a focus on disarmament that save lives. The growing complexity of contemporary armed conflict, when mixed with lax control on weapons, is a growing source of human insecurity.

This complexity has involved the number and nature of actors involved, which can include States, terrorist organizations and non-state armed groups. Internal conflicts can spread to pull in regional and international revivals, including major military powers.

While most of the armed conflicts over recent decades have been intra-state, they continue to be fought with major conventional weapons designed for use against competing armies on traditional battlefields. Non-State actors are increasingly well equipped, owing in large part to diversion from poorly secured stockpiles.

As armed conflict has increasingly moved from open fields and into villages, towns and cities, the humanitarian impact has been devastating. These impacts have been well-documented, including by many of the non-governmental organizations present in this room today. We have seen this pattern of harm repeat itself in a far too many situations – affecting cities and the civilian populations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Ukraine, Yemen, Palestine, Libya, Sudan and other areas.

These realities compelled the Secretary-General and the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross two weeks ago to launch a joint appeal for an end to the devastation and civilian suffering caused by the use of explosive weapon in cities.

This appeal recognizes that the inherent vulnerability of civilians in populated areas makes it imperative for States to reassess and adapt their choice of weapons and tactics to avoid civilian harm. In this connection, the appeal seeks action by States and parties to conflict in five areas.

First, it pledges support the efforts of States to develop a political declaration, as well as appropriate limitations, common standards and operational policies in conformity with international humanitarian law relating to the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

Second, it urges States, NGOs and humanitarian actors to strengthen the collection of data on civilian casualties and to establish mechanisms to mitigate and investigate harm to civilians, ensure accountability and enable lessons learned to be applied in future operations. Such data should be disaggregated by sex, age and type of weapon used.

Third, it encourages States to identify and share good practices for mitigating the risk of civilian harm in urban armed conflict, including restrictions and limitations on the use of heavy explosive weapons in populated areas.

Fourth, it calls on all parties to armed conflicts to take combat outside of populated areas to try to reduce urban fighting altogether, and it urges parties to allow civilians to leave besieged areas.

Fifth, it appeals to States to adopt policies and practices to avoid the use of explosive weapons with a wide impact area, due to the significant likelihood of indiscriminate effects.

It is hoped that these five points can serve as a guide for your future efforts. In addition, from the perspective of the Office for Disarmament Affairs, States should be mindful of how other measures in the disarmament toolkit can help mitigate harm to civilians in contemporary armed conflict.

This requires foremost adherence to the highest possible standards on their transfers of conventional arms. The best way to accomplish this is by joining the Arms Trade Treaty and strictly complying with its provisions. States must refrain from exporting conventional arms and ammunition if they are likely to be used to commit or facilitate violations of international humanitarian or human rights law. I encourage States to exercise special vigilance and avoid any transfer of heavy weapons and munitions in situations where they might be used in populated areas.

Diversion from poorly secured stockpiles is a consistent source of arms and ammunition for non-state actors. Unstable ammunition stocks located in populated areas can result in unplanned explosions with catastrophic impacts. The elimination of surplus, obsolete and unstable stockpiles of arms and ammunition remains the best way to address these concerns. This should be pursued in tandem with efforts to reduce excessive stockpiles.

Emerging weapon technologies that use explosive munitions also require focused attention. Advanced technology is often promoted as a solution for making the use of force more precise and less indiscriminate. However, new platforms, such as drones, can tempt militaries to reinterpret legal principles or contemplate the use force in situations where it would not have otherwise been possible. Common standards and, where appropriate, new norms should be pursued to ensure new technologies do not erode our progressive efforts to protect civilians.

It is also important to recognize that cities and public spaces are utilized differently by women, men, girls and boys, and the impact of war and weapons must be addressed accordingly. When gender dimensions are brought into disarmament discussions, there will be more sustainable and effective results.

Distinguished delegates,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

This Conference is an opportunity for the international community to take a first step together to reach a common solution to the well-documented problems caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. A political declaration, as consistently called for by the Secretary-General, would be a logical starting point which should lead to the subsequent development of practical measures, including appropriate limitations, common standards and operational policies.

The Office for Disarmament Affairs stands ready to support any open and transparent process of consultations and deliberations toward those ends. We commend the leadership of those States that have played a leading role and championed this cause, including in the context of the Secretary-General's Agenda for Disarmament – namely Austria, Germany, Ireland and New Zealand.

We also commend the active role of civil society – and particularly the International Network on Explosive Weapons – for elevating public awareness on these issues, collecting comprehensive data on civilian casualties and in promoting balanced and pragmatic multilateral dialogue.

I look forward to engaging with all of you over the course of this Conference.